Painter-Etching and Its Only Perfect Path in Art

Signs of Its Possible Development at the Hands of Americans—Mr. F. W. Benson's Brilliant Studies of Wild Ducks.

By ROYAL CORTISSOZ.

In art, if anywhere, it is risky to draw conclusions from the appearance of two swallows. Most decidedly they do not always make a summer. But they do raise happy hopes. Only last week we had occasion to record what is practically Mr. Childe Hassam's debut as an etcher, and to rejoice in his adoption of the needle. Now comes, at the Kennedy Gallery, an exhibition of prints by Mr. Frank W. Benson, one of the Boston members of the Ten American Painters. He, too, has begun to etch in very recent years, and he, too, makes us glad of his new efforts. Is there, then, some reason for believing that a revival of etching is presently to be witnessed in American art? Perhaps not; yet one cannot help thinking on the subject, and these men have something to say about it which makes the process of thinking uncommonly cheerful. They point out the right path—a circumstance by itself full of encouragement.

The etcher is, of course, always with us, and in many cases he is an exceedingly clever person. That is what is the trouble with him. He is clever where he ought to be a little more than that. He is possessed of great manual dexterity, and he is adroit in learning the particular lessons that may be taught him by this or that master. He can portray architectural subjects with extraordinary aplomb, quite in the vein of Whistler or Lalanne or Cameron, without too crassly imitating the given model—and without in any way rivalling that model. There are etchers of this sort in the younger group at present active who are so proficient and so successful that we can imagine their amusement over the suggestion that we may be in sight of a revival of etching. The revival is here, they would remind us. But we mean a revival in the true sense of the phrase; not the production of a lot of passable plates, but the emergence of artists with the will and the power to make etching a medium for serious personal expression.

The validity of Mr. Benson's inspiration is traceable to the best of all sources, to contact with life in the open air. These etchings of his are no products of the studio, however laboriously they may have been wrought. Their atmosphere is that of nature, observed with eager eyes and set down as in a flash. They are rich, too, in the magical element of light. That is a phase of art and nature that has always interested Mr. Benson. His best and most characteristic paintings have been those in which sunshine has played the dominating part, sunshine and the wind. Making his drawings and his etchings he has been influenced by the same predilection, and perhaps the greatest charm of his plates is their beautiful luminosity. His wild fowl are bathed in light. The waters on which they move positively take on color through the skill with which he illuminates them. And what is most exhilarating about it is the perfect ease and naturalness with which he conveys his bright, spacious impression. There is no forcing of the note, there is no tricky playing with values. He knows all about the effective use to which a stretch of white paper may be put, and there are heaps of blank spaces in his designs. But when he stays his hand and leaves an area in the composition untouched, it is in precisely the same spirit in which he delineates his ducks. That is the spirit of sincere realism.

Dealing with some of the most decorative motives in the world, it has never occurred to Mr. Benson to be merely decorative. The present writer does not recall ever having shot a duck and so does not pretend to judge these etchings from a sportsman's point of view, but he has seen the creatures making Japanese prints against the sky and knows how indifferent they are to the accepted principles of design. He doubly appreciates, therefore, Mr. Benson's restraint and his accuracy. The ducks in his etchings, like the ducks in the heavens, do not pose, they happen. They make some sort of a pattern, as, again, they do when they are on the wing, but the artist is not insistent upon it, and remembering unnumbered portraits of ducks we count his tact in the matter a portentous virtue. Naturally, he avoids the other extreme, he is not for a moment too casual, but he is free, unconventional, the understanding lover of wild life, as well as the sophisticated artist. The fates have been proportionately kind to him. They have permitted him to use the needle as he has not, to tell the truth, invariably used the brush, with so supple and so sure a touch that one would think he had been accustomed to it all his life. It is amusing to see how closely this authority is related to his leading subject. There are some figure studies in the collection, and they will do. One of them, the portrait in drypoint, called "Nan," is even lovely. But we can see some other etcher doing the thing as well, just as we can see Zorn, for example, doing the "Nude" (No. 15), and doing it a little better. We cannot see anybody else producing Mr. Benson's duck subjects with a tithe of his felicity.

He has come into his own in the best of his etchings and in the drawings that go with them. He interprets motives that indubitably command his frankest, simplest, sympathies; the medium is beguiling and inspiring, where pigment is occasionally so stubborn as to impose something like defeat. All his instinctive deftness comes to the surface, to give the fullest aid to his fine sense of light and air. The emphasis, unquestionably, is to be placed upon the larger aspects of his work, its atmospheric quality, its beauty recalling the vast scale and vitality of outdoor scenes. It is a fine thing for him to present his types with such vividness, to set forth in a really interesting manner the traits and movements of his ducks and blue herons and wild geese and fish hawks. But it is even finer to fill the room where they are displayed with the glow of their aerial background. It is the broad truth in his etchings and the individuality with which he expresses it that we find indicative, like Mr. Hassam's qualities, of a new life in American etching. There is so much more hope for the future, the immediate future, in one of his duck prints, than there is in a dozen of those latter day architectural studies which derive from Cameron, say, or Brangwyn, or Meryon, and so on through the whole hierarchy. Etching will truly revive, with us, when we use it not as a clever dodge but as an original, personal art. Mr. Hassam and Mr. Benson have shown that it is worth while, and they have shown the spirit in which it is to be employed. Will they not stir others by their example?

Ducks Swimming.
(From the Etching by Frank W. Benson)

Random Impressions of Art In Current Exhibitions

Miss Martha Walter and the Young Idea—The Despondent Immigrant—New Furniture and Old Fans—Portraits of Women.

Circulars are out for the thirty-first annual exhibition of the Architectural League, which will be opened to the public at the Fine Arts Building on Sunday, February 6. The show will last for about three weeks. There will be the usual competition for the Avery prize and the special prize of $300. The subject this year is a small chapel, assumed to be built as a memorial to three brothers who have died in defence of their country—an edifice supplied with pictorial and sculptural enrichment. On the same day that the League opens in New York the Pennsylvania Academy will open its annual exhibition in Philadelphia. There, also, there will be prizes, eight or ten all told.

Apropos of events out of town, we may note an interesting step taken by the Carnegie Institute, at Pittsburgh. Mr. John W. Beatty, the art director there, has made arrangements for the transferrence to his galleries of the paintings in the French section at San Francisco. There are about 250 works in the collection, which will be shown in Pittsburgh during the months of May and June next year. It is a good idea and suggests that something might be done to bring to New York more than one of the foreign exhibits at the Panama-Pacific Exposition.

Madame Yang-shi's Orientalia at the Anderson Galleries will make an important sale this week. The collection runs to nearly 1,000 pieces and embraces all manner of objects. Porcelains and lacquers, ivories, bronzes and brasses, jades and enamels, crystals and rugs are among the things listed. The porcelains include both decorated and single color pieces. This collection is to be sold on the afternoons and evenings of December 8, 9 and 10 and the afternoon of December 11.

Recent paintings by Mr. Stephen Parrish and some etchings by Mme. Louise Rogers are hung at the Braun gallery. At the Rose gallery to-morrow Mr. Charles Caryl Coleman will open an exhibition of some sixty-odd paintings that he has recently brought from his studio in Capri, paintings representing the work of a number of years. They include oils, pastels and paintings in tempera. The Folsom gallery offers an exhibition of Porto Rican landscapes by Thomas Watson Ball and another of portraits and paintings by S. Montgomery Roosevelt. A collection of thumb-box sketches by American artists may be seen at the Katz gallery. Hand-wrought jewelry and enamels by Frank Gardner Hale are on view at the Ehrich gallery. The Charles gallery exhibits old laces and embroideries, with a number of antique English, French, Italian and Spanish fans. At the National Arts Club the National Society of Craftsmen opens with a private reception next Wednesday evening its ninth annual exhibition.

An interesting exhibition will be opened on Tuesday at the Brooklyn Museum. Mr. Joseph Pennell is showing there a fairly exhaustive collection of his etchings, lithographs and drawings, including studies of European subjects and a selection from his sketches of American cities. At the clubhouse of the Art Alumni Association of Pratt Institute there is an exhibition of pencil drawings and thumbbox sketches by Dr. James P. Haney, director of art in the high schools of New York. Most of these are studies of subjects found along the coast of Maine.

We have received from London a catalogue of the modern pictures and drawings, brought together by the late Sir Frederick Wigan, which are to be sold at Christie's next Thursday and Friday afternoons. It contains some striking names, notably those of Sir John Gilbert, L. Raven-Hill, Frank Holl and H. Fantin-Latour. But the chief interest of the episode, at this distance, lies in the indication it gives of a resumption of activity in the great clearing house of art in London. Since the war broke out the sales at Christie's have been for charity. Now, it would appear, they are to be of the usual kind. It is, however, too early to prophesy as to just what may happen in the auction room this winter, either in Paris or in London. Sooner or later, of course, an immense number of works of art in Europe will be sent to the hammer by the war. The great question, at present still shrouded in mystery, is whether these things will not be brought over here for sale, even though a certain amount of business continues to be done by English and French auctioneers.

"This *is* a baby," Sir Walter has been credited with saying every time a new youngster was brought to him for his admiration. But the enthusiasm, it is to be hoped, the good wizard expressed is undoubtedly genuine in the visitor who sees the wide-eyed child about to smile at him from the frame of "The Big Animal Book" by Miss Martha Walter in the exhibition of her paintings now at the Reinhardt gallery. By all means Miss Walter knows children and sympathizes with them; it could not be otherwise with any one who has taught drawing as long as she has in the public schools in Philadelphia. All around are evidences of that fact. Look at the youngsters clustered about that fascinating toy balloon in the "Beach Scene, Gloucester," or in the two other canvases of the same name. Every one of these seashore sketches, and there are a number of them, is given in happy terms of color spots on gray-brown backgrounds, "Late Afternoon, Prighton Beach," for an instance. And this color is most exceptionally cheerful and winning as it strikes through the damp, sea-smelly clarity of air.

Her portraits, however, are where she succeeds with her most ambitious efforts. In them are constantly found her vivacity and humorous keenness of character-getting. See the breezy health of "Miss Dorothy Lee Bell," or the touseled, plump fifteen-year-oldness of "Ann Elizabeth," with their freshness of color; for Miss Walter's color is steadily fresh, even when dealing with a gray-brown dress.

It is not often that women really succeed in art, perhaps because they are ever striving therein for masculine "strength." Miss Walter has the good sense to keep her femininity. She is never sugar-sweet or prettyfied. But she brings to the visitor the same cordial sense of reciprocating regard that he feels when a really good and technically skilful young actress comes on the stage in the theatre. For Miss Walter understands how to handle her tools. She does not exactly draw, though she does something quite as satisfactory. She places, with apparent swiftness, spots of color of the right quality and value and shape in the right place on her canvas. Her technique, like that of most good artists, is something learned and consciously forgotten when at work. It is like the barbed wire fence that the colt finds around the pasture by pricking himself on it. Later as he grows he forgets the fence is there, but somehow he never gets into further trouble with it. Miss Walter has got by the pricking days. She stays in the pasture and enjoys herself. So do you with her.

"The theme is the meaning of America to the immigrant and of the immigrant to America; America as the fusion of many different races, traditions and forces into a vital and unified whole; America as the land of freedom and the opportunity for individual development." This is on the wall of the exhibition of "The Immigrant in America" prize competition at Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney's studio, at 8 West Eighth Street. It strongly tempts the visitor to say to the adolescent competitor, "Young man, take some one of your size."

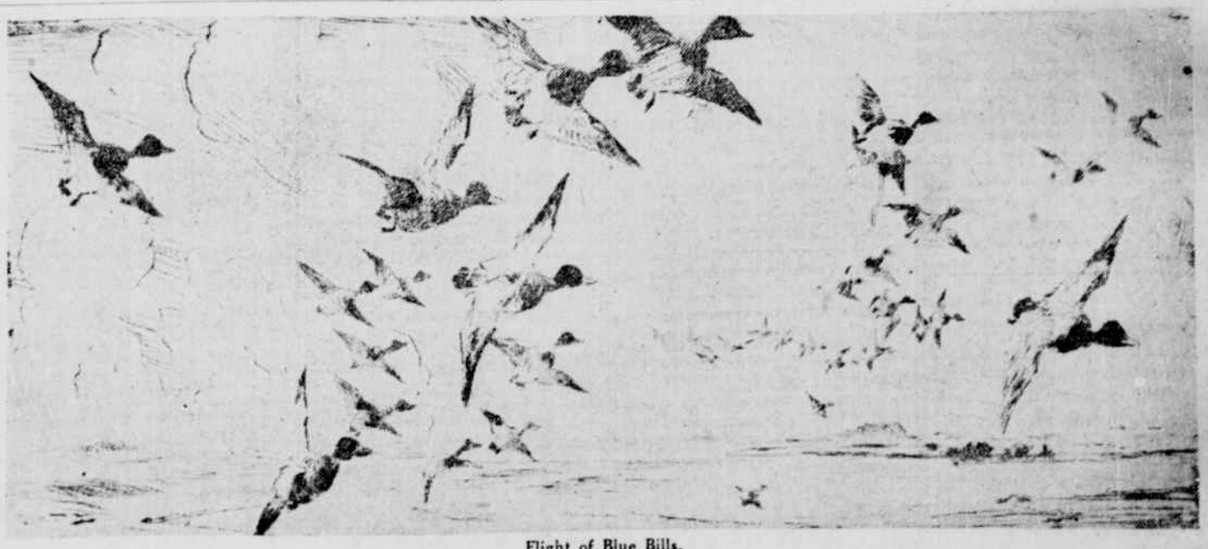
The exhibitors, for the most part, seem despondent about the immigrant. However, when the art does not cry aloud for itself some one comes up and mentions the fact that "the cross in the prize bit of sculpture symbolizes child labor." There are a number of reasons for this despondency. In the first place, the work, for the most part, is that of young men; and the younger the human animal the more he delights in picturing blood and gore, clean back to the time when he played Indian and tried to scalp sister. As he goes on in life and meets a few of these stomach-sickening realities he dodges them a little in what he hopes to call art and philosophy. Another source of discouragement comes from the fact that most of the competitors have been through the struggle themselves and have not progressed in it any further than New York City. It needs a great deal wider understanding than they have obtained to realize that this huge, insular melting pot, called Manhattan Island, is just about the worst spot where they can view immigration, and is not even as typical of the meaning and scope of the United States as Wichita, Kan.

Turn now to the first prize composition, a sculptural group by Mr. Beniamine Buffano, entitled "I Come Unto My Own and My Own Received Me Not." Granted that this is the way he feels about it, his figures say so with a naive, jumbled effectiveness. The composition is without movement; yet it is by all odds the best in the room. The second prize is a painting. Mr. F. G. Applegate, in the third prize, has got hold of a real idea with a genuine lift; the weight of toil, the hope of future, the offering of youth, all are there. Unfortunately, the sculptor has to say so in such weighty symbolism of arms and legs—which means that they are anatomically out of the question—that his medium distracts from his theme. The fourth prize is naked horror.

Two other prizes are given to a black and white drawing and a poster. The prize drawing, by Mr. Charles R. Harley, has a sombre weight and effectiveness that attracts you to it from across the room. As for the poster prize, some of us will beg leave to differ with the judges on the basis that the initial requisite of a poster is to interest the man in the street. For instance, they might have given it to the work of Arthur Crisp, representing the man and woman and child of the Old World on the shore of the land, turning to pluck from the tree of golden apples. It is sincere, simple in its brown and gold coloring, decorative and filled with the hope that strangers must bring to our country. Miss Anne Merriam Park has said it in another poster near by, "They Bring Forth Strength, Ambition; They Ask Liberty, Opportunity." Neither of these artists, however, attempts to crowd the emotions of the universe into two square feet of canvas. Both suggest that there is more than struggle and labor on the

Dorothy Lee Bell.
(From the Painting by Martha Walter)

The Big Animal Book.
(From the Painting by Martha Walter)



Flight of Blue Bills.
(From the Etching by Frank W. Benson)

The exhibition of American industrial art, under the auspices of the American Federation of Arts, now to be seen in the main hall of the Avery Library of Columbia University, possesses nothing the counterpart of which cannot be found in thousands of publicly and privately arranged rooms throughout the country. Yet for all that the exhibition should be praised in its accomplished effort to state anew that the position at last reached by furniture "made in America" may command sincere respect. Grand Rapids, Michigan, need no longer arouse a mental picture of folding cots and kitchen chairs and shiny yellow sets for Harlem flats. It should mean that another corner of our land has set up a virile art.

The scheme of the exhibit, the same as that recently shown in the National Museum, in Washington, D. C., is sanely eclectic. By furniture its organizers seem to mean everything that we of the United States have about us in the rooms in which we spend our lives So first the visitor may turn to an excellent upholstered late English renaissance armchair and settee from S. Karpen & Brothers, and next to a charming bronze of a young Diana by Janet Scudder. Again there are verdure-like, soft, gray-green chair upholsteries, made by the Edgewater tapestry looms and nearby a reduction of Frederick MacMonnies's virile Nathan Hale. Mirhali Oriental rugs, of soft brown texture, made by the United States Persian Carpet Company, are ready for the floor and many tastefully designed silks for the walls.

Of all the arts in America architecture is advancing with the greatest strides. On every side public and private buildings are evincing an extraordinary refinement of taste and strength. It is to this advance of architecture that is due this like advance of its allied arts and crafts. Unfortunately for furniture, however, the chief improvement in architecture is all directions, in New Art landscapes by Montfort Coolidge, in not quite such new art color bursts like "The Lilies of the Field," by Theresa F. Bernstein; in impressionistic landscapes, as "In the Valley," by S. A. Weiss; in grewsomeness in black war and gray cadavers of the fashion of "The Patriots" or "Washed Ashore," by G. Higgins, and in uninspired portraits.

To make the best of the situation, take first "Lake Erie Bluff," by Adele Green's flying machine. So the Washington Irving High School deserves commendation for its achievement in recognizing that art is one the things our youngsters should imbibe along with the three R's. The pity of it is that the "Associat.on for Culture," the "Gemeinschaft für Kultur," should be in charge. They have achieved the apotheosis of mediocrity; mediocrity in good work. Only why exhibit it, especially when teaching the young idea to shoot—unless the work is the target.

at the drawing board rather than in the execution. The freedom and life given by affectionate labor even to the humbler Colonial frame houses is not to be found to-day.

The component parts of the modern buildings seem turned out by the thousands by shops where employers and labor unions are both, as a rule, building these parts in the sole effort to obtain as large a share as possible of the fattest conceivable profits.

So it is with furniture. Style we have and elegance, in the best use of the word, of which to be proud. But the personal equation is sadly lacking. Our tables and chairs show none of that subtle difference which, to be Irish, sets apart twins who are exactly alike. For that elusive quality, it is to be feared, we must wait for the slow effect of time, assisted by the ravages of our children's boots.

There was another Franco-German difference away back in 1715. At least so one is led to believe by a fan in the exhibition of antique hand painted fans at the Bonaventure gallery. "The Prince de Dissenbourg given battle before Meudon by Prince Soubise," so runs the inscription which its first fair owner wrote upon it in a tiny feminine hand. Dissenbourg, in a Hessian hat, is hastily departing up a trench, pursued by the debonair Soubise in a red coat. The extent of the battle is indicated by the way the landscape is loaded down with guns and things. Also, that there may be no mistake as to the victor and vanquished, the fair owner took care to label each of them on the fan after her conquering hero had presented it to her. Times have not greatly changed. Another member of the fair sex, who is confiding her joys to a parrot on another such fan, wears bloomers.

The collection certainly should interest those with—and without—the money to purchase, who have a taste for such things. There are Louis XIV fans of delicate gold work inlaid in tortoise shell, of ivory and pearl, painted, in no uncertain hand, with court Dianas and Venuses. There are Regency fans and Louis XV fans, where classical subjects give place to the Watteau style of rustic, or where the much berouged members of a family smile from miniature framed panels. Of swan-skin and flexible ivory and Vernis-Martin they are.

Etchings, engravings, or lithographs of portraits of women, from mezzotints of da Vinci's "La Belle Ferroniere" and "Mona Lisa," to an illustration of a mother nursing her child by Paul Helleu, are on exhibition in the "Portraits of Women" in the prints division of the New York Public Library. Here and there, of course, appears the direct work of some artist himself; as an example two dry-points by Paul Helleu, or a striking etching of "Miss Anna Burnett" by A. Zorn. For the most part, however, they are but ghosts of the portraits of fair women, old friends, indeed, but viewed through the screen of personality, which even the best engraver imposes on his work. See Valentine Green's delicate and refined mezzotint of Sir Joshua Reynolds's "Lady Elizabeth Compton."

Then walk across the room to look at S. Arlent Edward's mezzotint of the same lady. Quite a different character is she.

For all that, engravings have charm and many famous ones are here. Most obvious of them all are a line of familiar works bringing forward anew the masterpieces of English potraiture; Valentine Green's mezzotint of Reynolds's "Lady Elizabeth Delmo and Her Children" for one; Cole's wood engraving after Lawrence's "Mrs. Siddons," for a second. Then, too, there are others we unquestionably like to meet; the engraving by E. Mandel of Titian's "La Bella," S. Arlent Edward's mezzotint of Holbein's "Ann of Cleves"—though the color might be better—which shows again what a master of studied work was that painter; and, for the modern complement Richard Josey's mezzotint of Whistler's "Portrait of his Mother," bringing out anew the undercurrent of sentiment in that extraordinary man.

Not so very long ago the idea of an art exhibit in a public school was in the same class as that of Mr. Darius Pollock. It is always pleasant when an artist presents a newly remembered mood of nature. Ricker Knox exhibits a pleasing, soft, brown marine of yachts at anchor. "The Son of the Rabbi," by Louis Weinberg, shows character in the face of a smock-frocked youngster holding a toy dove. Also what little sculpture had been installed at the early hour this review was made seemed better than the paintings, especially Paul Herzel's smaller figures of animals. Of course, there must be mediocre work from which to develop newcomers' shoulders. There is also what justifies the toil, the prospect of hope achieved. Perhaps Miss Olive Rush expresses it best of all in her painting. Here is man, stern to face a strange future; girlhood, with the light of hope in fresh eyes, and a child who some day will become the fulfilment of that hope, if this nation is to endure.